

CEs Aid in Space Shuttle Columbia Recovery

Air Force civil engineers played an active role in recovery efforts following the tragic loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia on Feb. 1.

The day of the disaster, the 2nd Civil Engineer Squadron from Barksdale Air Force Base, LA, deployed a 70-person disaster assistance team to Lufkin, TX, at the request of the Texas Department of Public Safety. They were the first federal agency on scene and quickly set up a mini-Disaster Control Group to assist local officials. The multi-functional team included an on-scene commander and representatives from fire, explosive ordnance disposal, readiness, surveying, contracting and legal.

The 2nd CES EOD Flight had existing technical data for the Shuttle orbital vehicle on hand, and deployed personnel were able to act as advisors to local fire and law enforcement officials. They educated local responders on hazards associated with Shuttle debris and helped evaluate pieces as they were located.

As the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency arrived on scene and assumed control, the team from Barksdale scaled back its operations and returned home on Feb. 3 and 4.

Back at Barksdale, members of the 2nd CES rallied to prepare facilities critical to the recovery and investigation. The Base Supply mobility processing facility, which had recently been reconfigured for an Article 32 hearing, became the accident investigation headquarters and command center. A portion of a multi-aircraft B-52 hangar was set up as a temporary mortuary facility, with CE providing generators, lights, and electrical locks for security. Nose Dock 6, normally used for B-52 maintenance, was prepared for use as the primary NASA/FEMA recovery center. CE thoroughly cleaned the building, sanitized hoists, provided

additional lighting and electrical panels, and installed hangar door rails for security purposes. Heavy duty plastic was spread over the floor to provide a surface for laying out debris.

On Feb. 4 the seven-person EOD team that would perform the bulk of the recovery and advisory work in Texas hit the ground running at Barksdale. Headed by the EOD functional manager from Headquarters Air Force Space Command, SMSgt Rocky Dunlap, and comprised of six EOD members from Patrick AFB, FL, the team organized into three, two-person teams and officially accepted responsibility for recovery operations from the 2nd CES EOD Flight.

At the outset, two teams reported for duty in Texas and the third team remained at Barksdale to supervise the inspection of shuttle debris arriving at Nose Dock 6. The field teams worked long hours, from sunup to sundown, responding to reports of debris suspected to contain, or to have come in contact with, explosives or explosive devices. Rough terrain, cold weather and rain mixed with sleet or snow for days on end made their jobs long and uncomfortable. In the words of team leader SMSgt Dunlap, "EOD responses to Shuttle material continue to be in the thickest of briar patches, swampiest marshes and dense foliage."

With the addition of some 2,000 Department of Forestry and fire fighter search workers in mid-February, the EOD team became heavily involved in providing safety briefings and explosives identification training for all search teams. They created a traveling identification board that featured inert mock-ups of the items they had found and anticipated finding. They also printed up and distributed color photographs of explosive devices associated with the Shuttle.



SSgt Allan Powell, 45th CES, uses a Global Positioning System during Space Shuttle Columbia recovery operations. More than 5,000 ground search team members searched remote areas, marking questionable debris with a GPS coordinate for further investigation by the EOD team. (Photo by SSgt John Carroll)

Eventually, all three two-person teams were stationed in Texas, with search efforts focused on a 10-mile by 240-mile corridor beneath the Shuttle flight path from Ellis County southeast of Fort Worth to the Toledo Bend Reservoir. At the height of the operation there were more than 70 state, federal, and private agencies involved in the effort, with more than 5,250 workers mobilized to assist. The EOD teams were engaged in supporting efforts on the ground, in the air, and under water, with approximately 45 aircraft and helicopters and 66 divers and sonar teams assisting in the search.

By mid-March over 44,000 line items of debris had been identified, catalogued, and prepared for shipment from Barksdale to the Kennedy Space Center. Explosive items were stored in a special munitions bunker on base until proper disposition or disposal arrangements could be coordinated with NASA.

The members of the EOD Shuttle recovery team who served without rotation from Feb. 5 are: SMSgt Rocky Dunlap, HQ AFSPC, and SSgt John Carroll, SSgt Mike Chamberlain, SrA Marlon Mitchell, SSgt Alan Powell, TSgt George Price, and TSgt Brett Rogers, all of the 45th CES, Patrick AFB, FL. (Lois Walker, HQ AFCEA Historian)